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ABSTRACT

A study examined the classroom communication behaviors adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate with highly effective and highly ineffective instructors. Subjects, 155 traditional undergraduate students (68 males and 87 females) and 95 adult learners (23 males and 71 males) at a large midwestern university, rated the communicator style and power bases used by either a highly effective or highly ineffective teacher. Results indicated that both groups of students agreed on the communicator style and power variables that characterize a bad teacher. However, the two groups differed in their perceptions of how good teachers communicate and use power in the classroom. (One table of data is included.) (Author/RS)

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Classroom Communication Behaviors Associated with Teacher Effectiveness: A Study of Adult Learners and Traditional Undergraduate Students

by

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Abstract

The present study examined the classroom communication behaviors adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate with highly effective and highly ineffective instructors. One hundred and fifty-five traditional undergraduate students (68 males and 87 females) and 95 adult learners (23 males and 71 females) at a large midwestern university rated the communicator style and power bases used by either a highly effective or highly ineffective teacher. Results indicated that both groups of students agreed on the communicator style and power variables that characterize a bad teacher. However, the two groups differed in their perceptions of how good teachers communicate and use power in the classroom.

Classroom Communication Behaviors Associated with Teacher Effectiveness: A Study of Adult Learners and Traditional Undergraduate Students

Over the last 15 years, a number of studies have established a meaningful relationship between teacher communicator style (Norton, 1978) and teacher effectiveness. This developing body of research indicates that instructors who are friendly, relaxed, dramatic, attentive, and open communicators, for example, are perceived to be effective teachers--teachers who create high affective evaluations for their classes (see Andersen, Norton & Nussbaum, 1979; Norton, 1977; Norton & Nussbaum, 1980; Nussbaum, Comadena & Holladay, 1987; Scott & Nussbaum, 1981).

The aforementioned studies underscore the theoretical significance of the communicator style construct for the study of classroom communication and provide instructors with some practical suggestions for the management of classroom communication. However, this research does not reveal how, if at all, instructors should change or modify their communicator styles for different student audiences. After all, effective communicators adapt their messages to their audiences. Indeed, Norton (1983) notes that a number of contextual, situational, and temporal factors associated with an interaction may affect the communicator styles exhibited by interactants. This suggests, then, that different student characteristics may elicit different communicator styles from their teachers and that different teacher communicator styles may predict teacher

effectiveness for different student groups. Alternatively, communicator styles that are effective with one student group may not be effective with another group.

One limitation with the teacher communicator style research is that it has focused almost exclusively on what may be called traditional undergraduate students. However, a significant and growing portion of the total pool of undergraduate students consists of adult learners. Many colleges and universities have developed active programs to recruit and educate this non-traditional student body. Instructors are finding that they must teach courses comprised of both traditional undergraduate students and non-traditional, adult learners, or classes composed entirely of adult learners. This reality raises a question with both practical and theoretical significance: Do the same teacher communicator style variables predict teacher effectiveness for both traditional undergraduate students and adult learners?

Recent comparative studies of the relationship between teacher communicator style and teacher effectiveness involving adult learners and traditional undergraduate students suggests that these two student groups associate different communicator style variables with teacher effectiveness. For example, Comadena, Semlak and Escott (1992) had adult learners and traditional undergraduate students rate the communicator style and the overall effectiveness of their instructors. Results indicated that,

for traditional undergraduate students, an effective teacher was one who was able to create and leave a lasting impression on students, was friendly and attentive to those with whom they interacted. For adult learners, an effective teacher was one who able to leave a lasting impression, friendly, relaxed, attentive, non-dominant, and precise in his or her communication with students. This study also revealed that teacher communicator style accounted for more variation in teacher effectiveness for adult learners (R-square=.64) than for traditional undergraduate students (R-square=.43), indicating that how a teacher communicates is more strongly associated with teacher effectiveness for adult learners than for traditional undergraduate students.

Another important component of teacher communicator style is his or her style of influencing students in the classroom. Instructors must often seek to influence students to perform various tasks and activities to enhance student learning. In a second study (Comadena, Semlak, Shaffer & Escott, 1991), teacher effectiveness was found to be related to how teachers seek to influence students in their classrooms. For both traditional undergraduate students and adult learners, teacher use of expertise was associated with teacher effectiveness. However, traditional undergraduate students associated the use of referent power with teacher effectiveness. Adult learners, on the other hand, associated the absence of threats and punishment (coercive power) with teacher effectiveness.

One limitation with the Comadena et al. (1991, 1992) studies is that adult learners rated the effectiveness of an instructor who was selected to teach because he or she had previously demonstrated his or her effectiveness as an instructor; only instructors who were good teachers were selected to teacher adult learners. Thus, students may not have evaluated the tendencies of "typical" instructors. Hence, it is not clear from these studies if certain communicator styles and influence strategies should be avoided because they are likely to arouse negative evaluations on the part of students.

The purpose of the present study was to extend the research of Comadena et al. (1991, 1992). Specifically, the present examines the teacher communicator styles and power bases that adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate with highly effective and highly ineffective teachers. The design of the present study should reveal practical information regarding specific communicator style and influence strategies that should and should not be used in working with both groups of students. In addition, the present study may be theoretically significant in that the results may underscore the need to carefully consider characteristics of students in developing explanations regarding the relationship between communicator style and teacher effectiveness. The following research questions were examined in the present study:

RQ1: Do adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate different communicator style variables with effective and ineffective instructors?

RQ2: Do adult learners and traditional undergraduate students associate different power bases with effective and ineffective instructors?

Methodology

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 155 traditional undergraduate students (68 males and 87 females) and 95 adult learners (23 males and 71 females) at a large midwestern university. The average age of the adult learners was 22.03 years. The average age of the traditional students was 35.66.

Manipulation & Measurement

Subjects were administered one of two versions of a questionnaire developed for this study. One version asked subjects to recall the best teacher they ever had in their college career. The other version asked subjects to recall the worst teacher they ever had. Except for this manipulation, the two questionnaires were identical.

Students then recorded their perceptions of the communicator style and power strategies of the instructor they were asked to recall. Teacher communicator style was assessed using Norton's Communicator Style Measure (CSM; Norton, 1983). This instrument contains 45 Likert-type

items designed to measure the way one verbally and nonverbally interacts with others (Norton, 1983). The CSM operationally defines communicator style in terms of 11 subconstructs: friendly, impression leaving, relaxed, contentious, attentive, precise, animated, dramatic, open, dominant, and communicator image. The CSM, then, measures the extent to which an individual is animated, dramatic, relaxed, etc. in his or her communications with others. While the CSM was originally designed as a self-report scale, items can be reworded to permit observers to rate the communicator style of another (see Norton, 1983). Data regarding the reliability and validity of the CSM can be found in Norton (1978, 1983). In the present study, the 45-item CSM had an internal reliability estimate of .95 (Cronbach's alpha).

The procedure used to measure teacher use of power were adapted from McCroskey and Richmond (1983). The research questionnaire presented descriptions of each of the five (coercive, reward, referent, legitimate, & expert) bases of social power (French & Raven, 1968). Subjects were asked to report the extent to which the instructor recalled (effective vs. ineffective) used the power base described. For example, to measure teacher's use of referent power, subjects were given the following description:

> Referent power stems from a student's identification with an instructor. If a student likes an instructor and wants to please the instructor because of his or

her liking for the instructor, the instructor is said to possess referent power. The stronger a student's attraction to a teacher, the stronger the teacher's referent power.

After reading this passage, subjects read the following statement and recorded their responses to the statement on five 7-point semantic differential scales (agree-disagree, false-true, incorrect-correct, wrong-right, yes-no). In the present study, the teacher power scales had an average internal reliability estimate of .98 (Cronbach's alpha).

Instructors teaching sections of adult learners or traditional undergraduate students were contacted and asked to distribute a questionnaire in their classes. Subjects' responses were anonymous.

Statistical Analysis

To answer the research questions guiding this investigation, multivariate analysis of variance was performed. In this analysis, questionnaire manipulation (best vs. worst teacher) and student type (adult learners vs. traditional undergraduates) served as independent variables while communicator style and social power variables served as dependent variables. Univariate tests were planned to explore significant multivariate effects. Alpha was set at .05 for all tests of significance.

Results

Concerning the first research question, results revealed that student-type and teacher manipulation

interacted to affect students' ratings of teacher communicator style (Wilk's lamda=.912, F=2.27, df=10,236, p=.015). Univariate tests conducted on the 10 style variables revealed three significant student-type by teacher manipulation interactions. The observed F ratios for the significant interactions were as follows: contentious (F=7.60, df(1,245), p=.006); attentive (F=7.79, df(1,245), p=.006); and dominant (F=7.50, df(1,245), p=.007). Follow-up t-tests were calculated to identify differences that accounted for the significant interactions. Results revealed that, for ineffective teachers, there were no differences between traditional undergraduates and adult learners. However, for effective teachers, significant differences were observed for the contentious, attentive, and dominant communicator style variables. Adult learners rated effective teachers less contentious, less attentive, and less dominant than did traditional undergraduates. See Table 1.

The MANOVA performed to answer the second research question also identified a significant interaction effect (Wilk's lamda=.955, F(5,241), p=.046). Univariate tests conducted on the 5 power variables revealed one significant interactions. The observed F ratios for the two significant interactions were as follows: reward power (F=8.55, df(1,245), p=.004), and referent power (F=4.43, df(1,245), p=.036). Follow-up t-tests performed to interpret the significant interaction effects reveal two significant

differences. Again, traditional undergraduate students did not differ from adults in their evaluations of an ineffective teacher. However, the two groups did differ in their evaluation of an effective teacher. Adult learners rated effective teachers less likely to use reward power than did traditional undergraduate students. See Table 1.

Discussion

The research questions guiding this study asked if adult learners and traditional undergraduate students perceived good and bad teachers to possess different communicator styles and to use power differently in the classroom. The results of data analysis suggest interesting answers to the research questions. Specifically, both groups of students agree on the communicator style and power variables that characterize a bad teacher. However, the two groups differed in their perceptions of how good teachers communicate and use power in the classroom.

Table 1 reports differences in ratings of good and bad teachers for both adult learners and traditional students. Follow up t-tests revealed several statistically significant differences. When comparing means reported by traditional students and adult learners for bad teachers, no statistically significant differences were observed. Thus, even for the three style variables and two power variables found to be different for traditional students and adult learners, the differences were not caused by differences in their ratings of bad teachers. Rather the analysis found

the means between the traditional students and the adult learners differed in the evaluation of the good teacher. Adult learners, compared to traditional undergraduates, expect a good teacher to be less contentious, less attentive, less dominant, and less likely to use reward power. Conversely, traditional undergraduates, compared to adult learners, expect an effective teacher to more contentious, more attentive, more dominating and more likely to use reward power.

Overall, the results of the present study are fairly consistent with those from the Comadena et al. (1991, 1992) research. One very clear finding emerging from the comparative studies of traditional undergraduates and adult learners concerns the dominant communicator style variable. As in the Comadena et al. (1992) study, adult learners do not associate the display of a dominant style with teacher effectiveness. This, coupled with the observation regarding contentiousness, suggests that adult learners want to be treated as equals in the instructional process. That adult learners prefer a classroom atmosphere characterized by informality and equality, not one of "formality, semi-anonymity, and status differentiation between teacher and student" (Knowles, 1987, p. 47).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for teacher communicator style and teacher use of power by student-type and teacher effectiveness

	Effective teacher	Ineffective teacher
Contentious Style		
Adults	8.71[a]	13.19
	(2.41)	(3.17)
Traditionals	10.36[a]	12.58
	(2.93)	(3.66)
Attentive Style		
Adults	15.53[b]	10.31
	(1.49)	(2.86)
Traditionals	16.60[b]	9.65
	(1.92)	(2.88)
Dominant Style		
Adults	11.42[c]	12.16
	(2.35)	(2.81)
Traditionals	12.53[c]	11.28
	(2.89)	(3.01)
Reward Power		
Adults	19.42[d]	16.22
	(11.95)	(11.96)
Traditionals	25.31[d]	13.14
	(10.08)	(9.27)
Referent Power		
Adults	25.24	12.19
	(10.47)	(10.24)
Traditionals	28.12	9.89
	(8.84)	(8.39)

NOTES:

1. Table reports means and standard deviations. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

2. Results of t-tests performed to interpret univariate interactions are summarized with superscripts. Means with a common superscript are significantly different from one another. In each case, $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

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